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SUBJECT: WITH ELECTION IN THE BAG, SISLI MAYOR AIMS HIGHER

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Summary  
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1. In a meeting earlier this week with PolOffs, Mustafa Sarigul, Mayor of Istanbul's Sisli District, focused more on his national ambitions than he did on the local elections scheduled for March 29. With polls showing some 80 percent of the District supporting him for a third term, Sarigul can perhaps be forgiven for looking ahead.

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Mayor For Life In Sisli, If He Wants It ...  
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2. Istanbul's Sisli District is one of Turkey's most important business centers. Four hundred of Turkey's 500 largest companies have offices in the district. Home to some 300,000 residents, during workdays its population swells to four million. In a country that is overwhelmingly Muslim, seventeen percent of Sisli's voters are Christians or Jews, and the country's largest Armenian neighborhood is in the District. In the 2004 local elections, Sarigul, running for re-election as a candidate of Turkey's secular Republican People's Party (CHP), won 66 percent of the vote (a national record, he told us).

3. The 53 year-old Sarigul first attained national prominence in 1987, when he became the youngest person ever elected to Parliament. Last year, after unsuccessfully challenging Deniz Baykal for the CHP leadership in a close vote, he was booted out of the party. (Sarigul told us he blamed his short temper for the loss.) After a short period as an independent, he joined the Democratic Left Party (DSP), under whose banner he will vie for a third term as Sisli's mayor in the local elections scheduled for March 29. There is no doubt that he will win: He has 20,000 campaign workers (one for every ten voters); 40,000 people attended his opening campaign rally; and polls show his support around 80 percent. He attributes his success to "very intensive, one-on-one contact," a good team and a record of providing constituent services (education and handicapped assistance programs, in particular).

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... But He Has A Bigger Prize In Mind  
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4. Sarigul has set his sights on the Prime Ministry. While he expects the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to get 45-50 percent of the vote in the local elections (a prediction in line with consensus estimates), he thinks this

will be AKP's last electoral victory. He notes that no Turkish party has ever won three general elections in a row, and predicts that this same fate awaits AKP in the 2011 national elections. He says Erdogan's two biggest advantages are Baykal and Bahceli (leaders of the two largest opposition parties, widely scorned for their fecklessness). He believes that an effective opposition leader (to wit, him) can successfully challenge Erdogan. Indeed, Sarigul fancies himself to be a post-partisan politician, as shown by his leadership of the Sisli District Council: While the Council has 29 CHP and 8 AKP members (and no DSP member), Sarigul claims that 97 percent of its decisions are arrived at by consensus, thanks to his leadership.

15. Sarigul has not yet chosen the vehicle that he will use to make his run at the Prime Ministry. He was quite clear to us that his association with DSP was strategic, and that if DSP did not make the changes he feels necessary to support his national ambitions (polls show DSP currently commands the support of but two percent of voters), he would quit the party and form a new social democrat party. "History will not write about what I did as leader of a party," he said, "but what I did as Prime Minister." He claimed the support of several (unnamed) prominent political leaders, as well as of some 120,000 volunteers in all 81 provinces, waiting to spring to action once he makes his decision. He is not concerned about financing a campaign, saying that with popular support, the money will come. He will start organizing right after the local elections, and will make a decision how to proceed 3-4 months later.

16. In several ways Sarigul does not fit the mold of a

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Turkish politician:

-- He is proud of his outreach to minority communities. He has appointed an Armenian deputy mayor (who participated in our meeting), and supports opening the border with Armenia. He is pro-Israel and was very impressed by Israeli President Peres, with whom he met nine months ago. He has publicly criticized Erdogan's Davos behavior, and visited the Israeli consulate after the Davos incident to deliver this message personally to the Israeli Consul General. (These positions manifestly must be driven by principle, since even in Sisli the minority communities are too small to influence elections and nationally voters strongly support Erdogan's actions.)

-- He is as interested in and familiar with international affairs as with domestic affairs. He considers himself to be something of a diplomat (again, in pointed contrast to Erdogan, who relishes his reputation as a street fighter), and claims to be as familiar with international issues as with domestic issues. His office is filled with pictures of him meeting with international religious and political figures.

-- He is an unabashed fan of the U.S. and of EU accession. He believes that Turkey can be the leader of the Middle East and Central Asia, with the U.S. as its "main ally." He has opened an EU Center at the municipal building, and is working on a waste management program with the EU.

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Comment  
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17. During our meeting, Sarigul repeatedly compared himself to U.S. President Obama, but in fact he more closely resembles the man he hopes to succeed: Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan. Both are charismatic, natural leaders, who breed intense loyalty in their followers. Both are tireless campaigners and workaholics, tightly focused on constituent services and outreach. Both know how to raise the money needed to fund their ambitions. Both have short fuses and explosive tempers. But, whereas Erdogan is openly religious

and proud of his working class roots, Sarigul is secular and fancies himself to be urbane. The Turkish commentariat has long bemoaned the absence of a competent secular opposition party with credible leadership and modern organizational capabilities. Just as Erdogan emerged from Istanbul to displace bland, tired party leaders on the right, Sarigul may be the Istanbul voice to rejuvenate the left.

Wiener